

Bazza at his best

Graeme Blundell pays tribute to a great Australian entertainer with more than 50 years in show business

In the early 1950s, Barry Crocker and two young mates from the Geelong West Cycling Club, known as the Three Caballeros, used to terrorise the 60-40 dance at the local Palais Royal, a one-piece picture theatre and the only place for any red-blooded teenager to be on Saturday night.

The budding Fred Astaire had worked out a smart-arse line to shield them from the terror of what was known as the knock-back from the wallowers in their hooped skirts, tulle and taffeta. If the request for a dance was rebuffed, they would retort: "Oh well, I only asked ya cause I felt sorry for ya."

There's no need to feel sorry for the inimitable Mr Crocker 52 years later at the end of his memoir (though he has moments of pain and regret) and I'm sure many women of a certain age will be lining up to dance with him after reading it.

From working-class beginnings in Geelong to the surreal days filming *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, Bazza, in a frenzy of motion, rarely drawing breath, jokes, swings, soft shoes, segues and occasionally sadly croons through four decades of the life of one of Australia's best-loved entertainers. You sometimes get the impression that, for Crocker, the microphone that became an extension of his right arm was really a golden wand, transforming the despair of endless one-night stands into a lifelong glittering floor show.

Recovering consciousness from a near fatal operation for peritonitis, the delirious entertainer awakened in a haze to two pretty nurses gazing down on him. Sing us a song, Mr Crocker, they were saying. Sing us a song. The sweetest sound in his life, he says, has always been someone asking him to sing. How to get him to stop has perplexed critics for 50 years.

Crocker has indeliguably trouped the whistletops of show business, never wanting to leave the stage. On his tombstone, he says, he would like the words "Here lies Barry Crocker etc. etc." And at the bottom in small writing: "I hope I didn't miss anything."

Puffing like the engine on a fast train, Bazza worked the cappuccino-soaked fire circuit in Melbourne in the '50s, crowned in seedy nightclubs and fancy theatres, was there when

Bazza: The Adventures of Barry

Crocker

By Barry Crocker

Pan Macmillan, 412pp, \$35

television started this parents watching him on a display set through the plate-glass windows of a furniture store), stared in successful variety TV programs ("the ghost of inexperience sent a chill through me") and turned chundering Bazza McKenzie into an icon.

That he would be blamed for perpetuating the ccker cultural cringe — a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder suffered by film-makers who keep returning to the same lowbrow themes, projecting a vigorous and funny but off-so-common self-loathing sense of national embarrassment — is just something else to tell stories about. And he has many more to tell: 412 pages get us to only the early '70s — apart from a revealing 2½-page end chapter that tells of his abiding Christianity and son Barry Jr, a famous travelling evangelist.

The writing is crisp and assured, though he has a bad habit of using exclamation marks the way a drummer uses boom boom to signal the end of a bad joke. The stories and anecdotes are polished and distilled, and you feel they have often been recounted to great effect, so elliptical have they become. Crocker knows about timing. It's easy to believe he has appreciated the companionability inherent in autobiographical reflection.

As anyone who works in show business knows, we need the continuity and security of often-told stories. And that is the great quality of Bazza Crocker, with happily no pretension to the literary, swaps yarns with the reader with the immediacy of someone, scotch in hand, talking to working performers in the green room after a show. Telling stories is one way of keeping alive the fortunes and miseries of our calling. It was not without good reason that a French playwright suggested a graveyard should be built next to every theatre.

Crocker, even though he has won a tuxedo for most of his career, has always had the common touch, that expression of collusion with the materiality of working-class life,



Consummate showmen: Barry Humphries as Dame Edna Everage and Crocker as Barry McKenzie

representing the culture of manual labour and class resilience. His memoir is warmed by it. An innate command of an almost vaudeville-like technique of direct address connects him with his audience, making him commentator as well as collaborator when he works live, and he has always colluded with his fans at the expense of his public personality.

He is the sort of star who can't resist sending himself up. And the intense biographical scrutiny by his audience has never discerned tragic flaws in the Crocker persona and hubris has not replaced his decent humanity. Though he admits in his memoir to "an ego-driven demon deep inside", insatiably demanding he follow his star-his wife, Dene, told him she was only really happy living with him for the short

period when his job was almost nine to five working in television.

I found it a pity that he so decorously avoids letting us in on what happened all those times when he was seduced by beauty and talent, a fatal failing he tells us. I'd admit that (selling my soul) I bought tickets on the naughty train and, influenced by drink or ego, like Blanche Dubois I enjoyed the kindness of strangers with some of the most beautiful women in the world. But as Mr Colgate once said: There's only so much toothpaste left in the tube before you have to start rolling it up from the bottom.

His first sexual encounter at 16 with the amply built Jill on the esplanade of Geelong's Western beach is the funniest in the book. "Ya finished?" is all she says to young Bazza when

after less than 10 seconds the time bomb that had been waiting to go off for 16 years detonated inside its rubber confinement.

The show-biz stories are terrific, especially the months spent working the Sydney clubs in the '60s. Sammy Lees's the Latin Quarter (attracted colourful racing identities). And he's on Casleborough Street (the chass) and Chequers on Goulburn Street (the money.)

And dramas, black strippers, punch-ups, suicide attempts, parties at the popular Follies (Begerre in Kings Cross. Not to mention the imbibing of a bottle of red label Johnnie Walker a night, the swag of scotch more than a calming ritual for Crocker. The gradual deterioration of his marriage to the long-suffering Dene is honest, painfully and dolefully dealt with until she finally sends him packing.

"Old Dr. Saage", as he describes his redemptive calling, was not able to heal for once.

No one can have normally drilled through nightclubs, strip joints, club circuits, legitimate theatres, television studios, recording booths and film sets without having a compelling understanding of show business. Crocker gives us a society in miniature, its secret wisdom that of bringing gawps of wonder to the eyes and all kinds of haliboo. And the effortless, purposeful projection of content that we call style.

The showmen of his generation are passing away and Bazza's achievement is to impart something of a vanishing world, a state of which Crocker is a charming emissary. At 68 he is still a showman; his voice does husky sadness but can belt with brawling strength. But he is something more: a familiar and endearing figure to be seen with mirth and respect, and remembered with special affection.

